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FRANCIS GARY POWERS INTERVIEWED

JOHN WILLIS: Francis Gary Powers, Operation Overflight; written in cooperation or conjunction with Kurt Gentry.

I think one of the enigmas of the 1960's was the story of Francis Powers. And I will give it to you from my own individual -- I often wondered what ever happened to Francis Gary Powers. What is the real story?

And there's sort of a bad taste in my mouth, and I often wondered why. I don't think too many Americans expected this man to commit hari kari, abort and destruct himself, although I have a feeling some people did. But there were many who wondered why didn't he blow up his ship. We had all this advanced, sophisticated mechanisms to get rid of our scientific know how.

And then I remember the newspapers covering his trial in Moscow. And what stuck to my mind was his saying that I'm sorry, like he was apologizing to the Russians. That didn't stick too well with me. I mean, it's bad enough, but I can understand to be sorry about being caught, but what he did I didn't think was that bad to stand up there and apologize to the Russians.

And then also, after he got back, there was a story for the inference in the newspapers that his wife had left him.

Now this is a story of a man who everything has gone wrong (sic). From a man who was highly skilled, a pilot, with our most advanced airplane, the U2, a hero; he comes home and he's under a cloud; and the Senate committee did give him some sort of fresh air.

But I often wondered in the back of my -- what was the real story? Did I have the real story? Maybe today we'll have that.

Welcome to Panorama, Francis Gary Powers.

FRANCIS GARY POWERS: Thank you.

WILLIS: Shall we start at the beginning?

POWERS: Yes.

WILLIS: Alright. In your book, and I must say I can't recommend this too highly because it tells the story, but we're going to just briefly touch on it.

Why didn't you destroy the plane?

POWERS: I found it physically impossible to do so under the circumstances that I was in after the explosion. The plane became unmanageable. The wings came off, I was spinning, had the high G forces, and I'm amazed that I got out myself.

WILLIS: You could not use the ejection seat because if you did it would cut off both legs. You had to go out manually.

POWERS: Yes, that's right. I had to open the canopy,

go out manually, and when I released the seat belt I was thrown half way out of the plane, and would have been thrown all the way out except the oxygen holders held me in. I'd forgotten to disconnect them.

WILLIS: There's a second factor involved many people were not aware of, myself certainly, that even if you did abort that, you're not going to destroy the whole plane. Is that correct?

POWERS: No, that would have been impossible. The explosive charge would have completely destroyed everything within about three feet of the center, six feet diameter.

WILLIS: There was a corollary a few years ago -- just a couple of years ago -- with the Pueblo. The Captain was censured for not destroying his secret material and electronic equipment there. Could he have done that?

POWERS: I don't know. From the reports that I heard, there were not adequate facilities to do it. Now this is only what I've read....

WILLIS: So there is a comparison, a....

POWERS: Well, there is with the exception that they were outside the territorial waters. They were not committing espionage legally.

WILLIS: Alright.

Now, the second question, and I'm trying to cover as much ground as possible.

When you were on trial, and you said I'm sorry, what did

you mean by that?

POWERS: I was sorry to be there.

WILLIS: That I can understand.

POWERS: No really, this has been something that there's been quite a bit of controversial discussion about. I said that I was sorry because in the Soviet law -- now this was on the advice of my court appointed defense counsel -- that I had to do this. It's written into the law that if you show repentance and are sorry for an act that you've done against them (sic).

And I was quite obviously guilty of espionage. In fact I was -- I happily admitted it because they were trying to make me an act of military aggression (sic) instead of spying.

But when I said I was sorry, I was sorry for being there; I was sorry that the flight wasn't completed. And when I said that I had no animosity or enmity toward the Soviet -- the Russian people, I meant that. They wanted me to say the Russian government. But I would not do that. I refused to do that.

WILLIS: That's understandable. And -- but often it is sort of misinterpreted the way it was out in the newspapers in the headlines as if -- and also went on to say that in further perhaps you had talked too much.

POWERS: Yes, I've heard quite a bit of that. But the CIA could have told them that I didn't tell everything I knew.

WILLIS: You never did tell the exact altitude, did you? And today you won't.

POWERS: (Words unintelligible) some other things, and still today I will not just in the off chance that one of these days we may need these planes again.

WILLIS: You admitted it sixty-eight thousand feet.

POWERS: Yes.

WILLIS: And the Russians bought that.

POWERS: They had nothing else to go by, even though some of our people in this country tried to tell them that that was a lie.

WILLIS: In this country also they came out to say that you had gone down to about thirty thousand feet, and you were struck there, refusing to believe that they had surface to air missiles that could hit at sixty-eight thousand feet, is that right?

POWERS: Yes, that was the report that was released, and something that even the Russians brought and told me that this had been released. And they said, did you lie to us? Did you tell us? And I said no, this is what happened, I was hit at sixty-eight thousand feet.

Now my point, I was trying to get this information back to this country. I emphasized sixty-eight thousand feet repeatedly so that they would know that I hadn't told them the correct altitude; so they would know that I was withholding some information.

And when I got back to this country later, one man said to me, we just kept wondering why the Russians made you say sixty-eight thousand feet. So I don't think my point got across.

WILLIS: From our intelligence sources, they were going along with the idea perhaps that you were being -- you had been brainwashed?

POWERS: I think they didn't know what to expect. I know I was lead to believe that -- and I believed on my own -- that I would be tortured, you know, killed, never heard of again.

WILLIS: Well why didn't the CIA, or the government -- when you came back here, why didn't they come out and say what you hadn't told, and what you had attempted to do? You were never prosecuted in any way, but you were almost damned by neglect, or tried to sweep under the rug.

WILLIS: Well, you know, the nature of an intelligence organization is to neither confirm nor deny anything. And the less they are in the news the better off.

So if they had come out and said something contrary to what had already been said, then they would have been in some kind of a hassel. I can understand a portion of it.

Now there were certain things that they could have said that would have helped me greatly and would not harm either US, or CIA, or anyone else. And they didn't do this. And I don't know why. To this day I don't know why.

WILLIS: What about the role of the newspapers? Do you think you were handled fairly by them?

POWERS: No.

WILLIS: Do you want to say a few more words about that?

POWERS: I think there was an awful lot printed in the newspapers that had no basis whatsoever. In fact, I know this as a fact.

I don't know why. I'm sure that early in the 1960's there were press releases from the White House or the government officials that were not completely truthful. But once everything was admitted and found out, these stories kept on.

Now I knew nothing about this until I returned. And it was a shock to me to find out what was going on, so much so in fact, that I stopped watching television and reading newspapers. I didn't know what to think. I was completely mystified by all this.

WILLIS: You returned to the United States in 1962 after spending eighteen months in a....

POWERS: Twenty-one months, ten days.

WILLIS: Twenty-one months in a Soviet prison. You were holed up for a little while over on the eastern shore, near Oxford, Maryland. And then you came back here to a couple of -- you call them safe places, I guess that's what the CIA....

POWERS: Safe houses.

WILLIS: Safe houses, that's what the CIA does. Why did it take you eight years to write the book?

POWERS: I was working for the CIA when I returned. And at that time I asked permission to write the book, and they gave me permission. So I started negotiations. I was just to the point of signing a contract with Holt, Rinehart, Winston and all at once

word came down that we would prefer that you didn't do that. It won't do yourself nor us any good at all. Just don't bring it up any more.

And I wrote Mr. McCullum (?) a letter and told him that I wouldn't at this time. But -- even though I didn't agree with his reasoning I would hold off. Because they did help get me back to this country, and I was very thankful for that.

And then over the years I have requested permission to write. You know, is it alright to do it now? Is the time okay? Because I have no intention of subverting the government or casting any doubts about the CIA, because I think they do a magnificent job.

But finally, just a year and a half or so ago I got to the point where I said I'm going to. And when I said that they said go ahead.

WILLIS: In the book you admit to that as a virtue, but sometimes you said I think that the failing is that you may be too patient. Is that right?

POWERS: I think so, yes.

WILLIS" Alright. There's one other thing, and I don't like to get on a personal nature. But you made the point in the book, and I'm glad you did because it cleared it up. I'm talking about that distaste in the mouth.

When you returned, I don't know how long it was, but it seemed like almost immediately, your wife left you.

POWERS: Yes, this is something that I would just as soon not go into, and I went into as little as possible in the book only because it had a great bearing on the story.

WILLIS: It seemed to add to everything I had been reading in the newspapers, that even your wife had turned against you.

POWERS: I don't know about that. That's a little too personal to, I think, really get involved with. I'd rather not go into....

WILLIS: You do in the book, though. You said that you had had problems before you had ever been captured, and that it is something that is personal. And you explained it satisfactorily to my knowledge, or to my feelings on it.

But after you came back you remarried; you have a very nice family; you live in California; went to work for Lockheed, again flying the U2's....

POWERS: Yes, that's right.

WILLIS: ...and it is a very unusual, different kind of a plane, with a wing span that is longer than the fuselage, isn't it?

POWERS: Yes, it's about twice as long as the fuselage.

WILLIS: Well, it's a wierd plane. But are they still -- I think it was used over Cuba, and other places in the world, is it still in operation?

POWERS: I have some neighbors who were stationed in Vietnam not too long ago, and one of them swears to his mother that he saw

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me flying over there. But I haven't been out of southern California until this trip.

WILLIS: Well this book is -- I don't want to give that away.

One minute, gee.

At the end you give three -- it's a hypothesis. Perhaps the Russians knew you were coming on that fatal flight, that last one of May 1, 1960. Maybe it wasn't an accident that you were shot down.

POWERS: I -- I really don't know. I do speculate on some things.

One is this Lee Harvey Oswald, that he had access to information about the U2. There is a document that's classified that -- from the Warren Commission Report -- has that title.

WILLIS: He was a radar man, right?

POWERS: Radar man at a base where U2's were stationed and flying every day.

WILLIS: Volunteered his information to the Soviets in -- in 1958 was it, '59, something like that?

POWERS: Well six -- about six months, I guess, before -- late '59.

WILLIS: Late '59.

Well, that's just one facet and name, Lee Harvey Oswald, involved with -- there are many others, and Kurt -- Kurt Gentry did a fine job here in working with you....

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POWERS: He did.

WILLIS: It's easy to read. It answers a lot of questions. And Francis Gary Powers, I tell you, when I first thought about it -- the story of Philip Millin (?) came back to me, it's not a corollary, but if what happened to you by -- there was a phrase not too long ago used by another man with reference to another situation, Mr. Moynihan said that "benign neglect". I wonder if that couldn't be applied to you too.

POWERS AND WILLIS: U 2.

WILLIS: There is that word, that combination again.

Thank you for joining me today. And I can't recommend it too highly. This book, I think, you will find fascinating.

Thank you for joining me.

POWERS: Thank you.